

**The Only Kid
From High School
Who Is Still in
Love With You**

alrena

The Only Kid From High School Who Is Still in Love With You by arena

Category: IT (Movies - Muschietti), IT - Stephen King

Genre: Angst, Character Death, Eventual Smut, Fluff, M/M, Period-
Typical Homophobia, Slow Burn, The Turtle (IT) CAN Help Us, They
get better though, Trans Male Character, Trans Richie Tozier

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Characters: Ben Hanscom, Beverly Marsh, Bill Denbrough, Eddie
Kaspbrak, Mike Hanlon, Original Female Character(s), Richie Tozier,
Stanley Uris

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Summary:

He has a crush on Eddie.

He thinks.

It's weird, because he didn't used to like Eddie, and he doesn't really know when he started to. But thinking about it now, it's undeniable that that's what it is—a crush. He looks at other boys, like Bill and Stan, and thinks about how he wants to be like them. He looks at their shoulders and hips and waists and he wishes his looked like theirs. He looks at Eddie's and thinks about how much he'd like to put his hands there.

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A story about coming to terms with your gender and sexuality, and never getting over your middle school crush.

1. Chapter 1

Author's Note:

Here's my super self-indulgent fic that's essentially and extended therapy session!!!!

inspired by a post which then got entirely away from me.

Notes for the Chapter:

Additional warnings, in case stuff like this bothers you: some discussion of like. coming to terms with gender + sexuality by an underage character! Nothing like crazy explicit but a general warning, will post additional content warnings in following chapters.

beta'd by gongji!

The summer sun beats down hot on her shoulders as she trudges through the cool water of the quarry. Her sister is lying down on the rocks with a couple of her friends, attempting to sun herself under the first cloudless sky in days. They'd moved to Derry at the end of the school year; it had been a rainy summer so far, and Rachel is as excited as her sister for a chance to be in the sun.

Rachel had shucked her shirt before diving in, and her shorts stick wet to her thighs. She floats on her back, the bright Maine sun turning the insides of her eyelids red. The sound of kids arguing draws her attention to the cliff overlooking the quarry. Three boys stand looking over the edge, and Rachel sinks into the water up to her eyes as she watches them. Only one seems keen to jump—the ginger—and she laughs when he rolls his eyes with his whole body and follows his two friends when they leave him behind, down the long trail to the shore.

The ginger reaches the rocks first, and whips off his shirt as he charges off the largest boulder. The other two are soon to follow,

whooping as they jump into the water behind him. Rachel watches them splash in the water for a minute before her eyes dart to her sister and her friends. They seem to be unbothered, so she swims over to the boys. As long as his older sister is around, she thinks it's ok to try to play with these strangers.

"Hey!" she yells, once she gets closer. The boys spin to face her, looking at her with different expressions. The red-haired boy looks excited, the one with light, curly hair looks vaguely interested, and the dark-haired boy looks suspicious. "You wanna play chicken?" she asks, and her stomach flips with joy when their faces split into open grins.

"We never have enough people for it!" the dark-haired one says, and Rachel laughs.

"Me either," she replies, throwing a thumb over her shoulder to her sister. "And my sister thinks she's too cool for it now."

"I c-c-call Stan!" the ginger shouts, pointing to the one with light hair. Stan shrugs and moves closer to him, while he adds, "You get the new kid, Eddie."

Eddie tries to stomp his foot in the water, but it just ruins his balance. He sputters as he rights himself, yelling, "That's not fair, Bill! I don't know this guy. What if he sucks?" Rachel just stares at him, a weird feeling in her stomach. It's not the first time she's been mistaken as a boy, but it's the first time it's happened with another kid. She thinks it's funny that this kid thinks she's a boy, but she worries they won't want to play with her if she tells them she's not one.

Instead, she advances on Eddie and raises her hands menacingly. "What if I rule? Don't count me out yet, bucko."

Eddie grimaces and scrunches his freckled nose and starts to protest just before Rachel ducks underwater to lift him on her shoulders. He clutches onto her curls as he squeals and kicks at her stomach with his heels. "Oh my god, oh my god, I *hate* this! Put me down!"

"No can do, Eddie Spaghetti. We have a fight to win!" She turns to

the other boys and chaos starts immediately. She grins unabashedly at Bill as she tries to push him over while keeping Eddie on her shoulders. Eddie and Stan grapple above her head, and she thinks Eddie is screwed. They're all small, having just barely started elementary school, but Stan is still bigger than Eddie and Rachel thinks there's no way Eddie's going to win. She's proven wrong when Eddie's tiny body explodes with a powerful shove that sends Stan toppling backwards into the lake.

Rachel lets out a cheer and begins to tilt backward. She can hear Eddie yelling as he falls with her, and she hits the water laughing.

She emerges to Eddie pounding his small fists against her back, shouting, "You idiot, the prize for winning chicken is that you *don't* get wet!"

Rachel splashes quarry water into his face and laughs again when he spits. "Yeah, but what's the point of being here if you don't want to get wet? You gonna spend the summer dry as a bone?"

Eddie groans and floats backward toward the middle of the lake, kicking his feet lazily. "Whatever, don't make sense at me."

Bill leaves the water to grab a beach ball from his bag, and they toss and smack it around for a while before Rachel's sister decides it's time to leave.

"Rachie!" Elizabeth calls, and the beach ball hits Rachel in the side of the face when she freezes. The boys will hate her now that they know she was lying—

"Well, I guess we'll see ya, R-Richie," Bill says, holding out a hand to her. She nods and shakes it, dumbfounded. She feels like she should say something, should correct Bill, but she's had more fun in the past hour than she has in her whole life, and she doesn't want to lose that. She silently waves to the other two before splashing back to shore. Being called Richie felt better than being called her own name, and she packs up her bag in unusual silence. She waves at the boys again after she tugs on her t-shirt.

"We're gonna be here to-m-morrow! You should come, t-too!" Bill

yells, hands cupped around his mouth. Eddie and Stan nod enthusiastically, and Rachie looks to her sister for permission, but she just shrugs.

“I don’t wanna come watch your scrawny ass, but I’ll cover for you if you want to be a rebel,” Elizabeth says with a wink.

Rachie shares a smile with her, before calling back to the boys: “I’ll be here!”

*

Rachie does meet them there the next day, and the day after, and then the day after that in town, and she spends every single day with them until school starts at the end of August. She rolls with Richie, and with the different pronouns, and it starts to feel weird to come home and be “Rachel,” to be “she,” to be “daughter.” Her sister Elizabeth knows that the boys think she’s a boy, and she knows that Rachel likes it. She gets used to calling her “Richie” when their parents aren’t around, and she passes it off as a joke but Richie knows that she really cares. Ellie can tell that Richie is happier, and Ellie wants him to be happy, and he loves her desperately for it.

The boys meet downtown for a last hurrah of hot dogs and ice cream. They’re all pleased to find out they were placed in the same class, and Richie doesn’t even think to worry about it until the problem rears its head.

“Rachel Tozier?” his teacher calls, and he sinks down into his seat as he raises his hand. He catches Stan’s eyes from across the room, and then becomes intensely interested in the frayed edge of his trapper keeper from his last school.

The boys ask him about it at lunch, because of course they do, especially after he managed to avoid them during the breaks between their classes.

Eddie slides onto the bench at their lunch table, side colliding with Richie’s as he flops down. “Kinda funny that Mrs. P called you a girl’s name,” Eddie comments, pulling a sandwich from his sack lunch.

Richie winces and starts tearing bits off of his own lunch bag, anxiety ruining his appetite. “Well, I mean. It’s my name.” He waits for the shoe to drop, waits for all his friends to leave him, waits to be lonely again.

Eddie cocks his head like he doesn’t understand, Bill freezes with a carrot halfway to his mouth, and Stan just shrugs.

“Wait, s-so... You’re a girl?” Bill asks, brow furrowed as he looks between Richie and the other boys.

“I mean, I guess. Yeah,” he says, and he hates it. He doesn’t like the way it makes him feel, and he doesn’t like the way they’re looking at him right now. He didn’t even think it was something he wanted, to be seen as a boy, before the boys mistook him for one, but now that he’s had a taste of it, he knows he could never go back to the way it was before.

“I think it’s stupid,” Stan says, and Richie looks down at his hands. It’s stupid that he’s tricked them so long, he knows—but Stan continues, popping a chip into his mouth. “I mean, you’re totally a boy. It’s dumb that you got named wrong.”

“I mean, it’s not just the name—” Richie starts, but Eddie cuts him off.

“Who cares. You’re not mad at us for calling you Richie, or calling you a boy, right?” Eddie asks, bumping Richie with his elbow.

Richie shakes his head, still looking at his torn-apart sack lunch. “No,” he says, taking his bottom lip between his teeth. “I don’t really want to be a girl.” His voice is almost too quiet for his friends to hear over the din of the cafeteria.

Bill reaches across the table to mess up his hair, and Richie squawks indignantly. He pouts up at Bill, who is looking at him with a face far too serious for a third-grader. “Th-then you’re a boy to us if you want to be,” he says. “Okay?”

Richie smothers his broad smile into his palm, looking between all of his friends. “Oh. Okay. Keep calling me Richie?” he asks, and they

murmur their assent, and he feels like things are going to be okay.

In class they pointedly and loudly call him “Richie,” and most of their classmates and teachers assume it’s just a nickname. But when he says something stupid or a joke that goes too far and his friends groan, “Richard,” he knows it’s so much more than that.

—*—

They’re getting ice cream for the hundredth time when Eddie laughs, and Richie’s stomach does a somersault, and he thinks, *Oh no*. He shoves the rest of his cone into Eddie’s cheek rather than face it. Eddie retaliates by smearing his own ice cream over Richie’s glasses, and the other boys just groan before Stan goes to get napkins for them. The adults at the Independence Day parade glare at the two of them, dripping all over the sidewalk, and it just makes Richie laugh harder.

Richie licks strawberry ice cream off of his glasses and Eddie makes exaggerated gagging noises while he goes to follow Stan back to the parlor. Rolling his eyes at them, Bill comments, “W-went a little bit far there, Rich.”

Richie shrugs, holding his glasses as the rest of the ice cream drips down his fingers. He can feel a little running down his face, too, and he squints at Bill as he sighs. “Yeah, well. Gotta keep him on his toes. Been too long since I got a good one off.”

Bill crosses his arms, which is about all Richie can tell through his blurry vision. “Do we need to come up with a ‘beep beep’ for pranks, now?”

“God, I hope not,” Richie says, switching hands to suck ice cream off of his fingers. “What are we, forty and boring?” He listens to Bill scoff, but he can hear the laugh under it, so he smiles.

“God, you’re disgusting,” Eddie comments, thrusting a handful of napkins at him.

Richie punches him in the shoulder. “Aw, you love it, Eds,” he says before he tries to scrub at his glasses. The unfortunate irony of his

prescription is that it's *harder* to see things if they're closer, and he holds his glasses far from his face to try to see what he's doing.

"Don't fucking call me Eds," Eddie mutters, and it's something he says so much that Richie barely even registers it at this point. "Give me your glasses, dipshit, you're just making it worse."

"Don't know how that's possible. You did a number on 'em," Richie replies, but passes them over without argument. He squints and is able to make out Eddie pouring water from a tiny plastic cup over the lenses, and his heart inches up the back of his throat with his recent revelation.

"Golly, Dr. K, you think of everything!" Richie says in a Voice, and he grins when he hears Stan choke on a laugh.

"Shut up," Eddie says, too focused on cleaning his glasses to be able to put any actual heat behind it. Richie wipes at the side of his face with his leftover napkins while he waits. He spits on one of them to get a stubborn sticky spot, and thanks God the Eddie is too distracted to notice, because it makes even Bill spit out, "Gross, Rich!"

"Here," Eddie says after another moment, holding Richie's glasses out to him. He takes them gratefully, blinking as he slides them back on.

Eddie's got a little wrinkle between his eyebrows as he looks over his handiwork on Richie's face, and Richie can't stop himself from pinching Eddie's cheeks and chanting, "Cute, cute, cute!" Eddie slaps his hands away with a laugh. "Thanks for cleaning me up, Eddie! Now I'll be able to see your mom when we have sex later."

He watches as Eddie's face go from a smile to one of *pure fury*, and cackles when Eddie launches himself at him. "I'm gonna fucking kill you, Tozier!" he yells as his small hands fist into Richie's tacky button-down. Richie manages to wrestle himself out of Eddie's grip and he starts running down the sidewalk.

"You're gonna have to catch me, shortstack!" he calls, and a laugh punches out from his chest when Eddie yells, enraged, behind him. He thinks he can hear Stan yell something along the lines of, "You've got to stop doing this," but he's already halfway down the block. He

doesn't care about the end of the parade, doesn't really care about the rest of the festivities, either. He's got his mind set on jumping in the quarry now that he's working up a sweat, even if he can't take off his shirt anymore. He extricates his bike from the pile they left them in at the park, and starts to bike that way, knowing his friends will follow.

The rest of the Losers catch up to him not too long after, and Eddie's only mad now because Richie didn't wait for them. He tips his head back, lets the warm July breeze whip through his curls, and wishes that his summers will always be like this.

*

Richie lies in bed, staring at the glow-in-the-dark stars on his ceiling and wills his brain to shut the hell up. He sticks one leg out from his sheets into the damp summer night air drifting through his window and wishes that he could just forget that he realized it, forget that it happened, and maybe things would go back to normal for him. Nothing would have to be different, and he could avoid having one more complication in his already complicated life.

He has a crush on Eddie.

He thinks.

It's weird, because he didn't used to like Eddie, and he doesn't really know when he started to. But thinking about it now, it's undeniable that *that's* what it is—a crush. He looks at other boys, like Bill and Stan, and thinks about how he wants to be like them. He looks at their shoulders and hips and waists and he wishes his looked like theirs. He looks at Eddie's and thinks about how much he'd like to put his hands there.

He's never really had crushes on anyone before, either, so it's a whole other bucket of worms to deal with. He can't really make sense of it in his head. He's a boy, having a crush on another boy, which he knows he'll get bullied for, but he's also not *really* a boy, so he shouldn't get bullied for it. Liking Eddie as a *boy* makes him nervous, but liking Eddie as a *girl* makes him want to puke. He knows that it's not going to be easy, no matter what happens.

Richie smacks his hands over his face and groans. He doesn't know how he's going to get through this summer.

*

Despite his worries, he makes it through the summer completely intact. He annoys his friends as much as he usually does, and Eddie even more so, but none of them seem to notice a change. Maybe there wasn't one, maybe he always gave Eddie that sort of attention, and it's only now that he's aware of his feelings that he even notices he's doing it.

School starts again, and he only has class with Stan. In October, it rains. Georgie goes missing. They make it through the school year, only mostly intact.

—*—

There's something wrong happening in Derry. Bowers is on them even more than he usually is, and maybe it's just because he took it easy on them after the news about Georgie and now he's taking out a school year's worth of missed beatings on them, but Richie doesn't think that's it.

They save the new kid from him—Ben—and their little group of Losers grows. When Bev shows up at the quarry and Richie yells, "We just got showed up by a *girl*," Ben doesn't even blink. He doesn't blink when Richie never takes off his shirt, doesn't blink even when Richie's wet shirt clings to his chest. Ben's a little weird, but Richie decides he loves him fiercely.

Bev lies on the rocks and suns herself like Richie's sister did the day he met Bill, Stan, and Eddie, and he joins the other boys in staring at her. He tries to make himself like her, tries to make himself make *sense*, but he can't. When he looks at her body, all he sees is what his body was supposed to be, and it makes him uneasy, so he does what he does best: distracts himself and everyone else with jokes.

He starts pulling stuff out of Ben's backpack, puts on an old-timey announcer voice, and then there's enough happening that he's able to feel comfortable again.

It's scary to hear about, but also nice to know that he's not the only one who thinks there's something wrong happening in Derry. Ben has put so much research into all of it, it's impressive and terrifying all at once.

*

Bev starts hanging around them after that day in the quarry, and Richie decides that she's not actually all that bad. They click almost instantly. She reminds him a lot of his sister, and she moved away for college last August, so it's nice to have that kind of presence around him again. He hangs out with her alone, sometimes, when the other boys are busy with chores and he's got too much energy to sit at home. He likes Bev a lot, and he tells her so one afternoon while they wait for the other Losers at their usual tree in the park.

"Y'know what, Beverly Marsh?" he asks, legs swinging in the air from where he sits on a low branch, "You're alright in my books."

"Gee, thanks, Rich," she intones, adding another knot to the thread bracelet he convinced her to make for him.

He hops down from the branch and flops down beside her, peering over at her work. "Y'know," he says again, and pauses as he picks at the fraying hem on his shorts. His voice goes quiet, and he bumps their elbows gently. "It's kinda nice to have another girl around." He only says it because he knows she knows, and because he really feels it's true. It's nice to have her around. He *likes* her.

Bev turns her head to frown at him. "You're not a fucking girl, Richie," she says, and she sounds almost angry.

"No, but you know what I mean," he says, and starts picking at grass so he doesn't have to look at her.

"I really don't," Bev says. She pushes Richie as she adds, "What, you think that we get along so well 'cuz we were both *born* girls?"

Richie falls onto his side in the grass, overdramatic for how light the shove was, and shrugs.

Bev scoffs and punches him in the thigh. "See, that's how I know

you're a boy. You're stupid." He looks up at her, looks up at her smile, and his throat starts to burn. "We just get each other, Rich. We *vibe*," she says, making a wave move with her hand, and Richie finally laughs.

When the rest of the boys finally get there, Richie springs up to pull Eddie into a headlock and mess up his hair, ignoring his protests both verbal and physical until he gets Eddie's hair nice and tangled. He catches Bev's eyes after, and the look she gives him isn't one he's all too pleased about. *Oh no*, he thinks, turning away to grab his bike as he laughs too loud. *That's going to be trouble.*

*

Bev calls them to help out with something at her dad's apartment and Richie is left outside to keep watch. Stan tells him to stay there, but he only agrees because Bev has her hand down by her side, index finger pointed and her thumb touching her middle finger, a hand sign learned from a book they'd read hunched over in the library when they were trying to come up with a solution for the inevitable problem they shared. His mom, with a smile on her face, had told him, "You're a woman, now," and Richie had fled to Bev and they'd grabbed a book on sign language and she'd figured out how to help him when he needed it without making it a *thing*.

So he stays outside because he trusts her, but it sucks to be left out. It sucks to be back in the position he was before they became The Losers, left alone and waiting for people to care about him again. He hides that hurt by teasing them when they finally emerge, cracking jokes and ignoring the look that Bev shoots him that tells him he was better off not seeing what was in there. *Eddie's mom's vagina on Halloween*, he jokes, but even just saying that makes him sick. He should thank Bev later.

Hearing that everyone's been seeing things just makes him feel even more left out, though he knows he should probably count it as a blessing. He's known most of these kids for years, and he's never seen any of them this scared before. He should be grateful that he hasn't had to experience something that terrifies them all so deeply, but he isn't, so he does what he does best, and deflects.

“Wait, can only virgins see this stuff?” he asks, and all eyes turn to him. “Is that why I’m not seeing this shit?” He doesn’t even get an eyeroll, and that’s how he knows it’s really serious.

And then they rescue Mike the homeschooled kid from Bowers too, and when Belch Huggins shouts his favorite slur for Richie, he doesn’t even notice because he’s too busy trying to aim a rock at his fat head. It eats at him later, though, like it does every time. *At least they know I’m a boy*, he reasons, and it’s the only way he can look at it to avoid staying up all night thinking about it.

—*—

When he finally sees things because of the clown, he wonders how everyone has kept it together as much as they have.

Bill and Eddie and Richie enter Neibolt, and it’s *gross, disgusting*, Richie’s mind supplies in Eddie’s voice, which real-life Eddie echoes, and Richie would laugh if he wasn’t so on-edge. There’s a poster tangled in cobwebs and vines in one of the front rooms, and Richie shuffles over cautiously. That saying about curiosity killing the cat feels all too real when he carefully picks the poster from the webs and reads what was good as a death notice in this town. Everyone is going to forget him—he knows it—everyone is going to move on and he’ll die alone, he knows, he knows, he knows.

Bill grabs at him and the poster crumples in their hands and Richie knows it isn’t real, but it’s just real enough to fucking terrify him, and he wants to go home. He wants to go back to his mom, he wants his sister to be back from school, he wants to *leave* so fucking bad. But they hear a girl upstairs, and Bill leads the way, and he’s drawn to follow like a magnet—always has been, always will be.

It’s not anyone’s fault when they get separated—it’s that clown’s—but Richie still feels guilty, intensely so, that he wasn’t paying enough attention when he hears Eddie’s screams cut off abruptly on the other side of the door. When he thinks he sees Eddie in the next room, of course he goes, why wouldn’t he? He trusts Eddie more than anything, and he’s so relieved he’s not hurt. He walks briskly into the room, only vaguely taking in stained glass and the empty chairs lining the walls on either side of him.

“We’re not playing hide-and-seek, dipshit,” he says, instead of *thank God, I thought you were dead*. He hears Bill call for him, and he turns, but then it’s too late. The door slams shut between them, and no amount of pounding from either of them can budge it.

There’s a deafening sound behind him that settles in the bottom of his ribcage. Richie spins and presses his back against the door as buzzing staccato tones cut through the air in time with his heartbeat. There’s two figures standing at the front of the room, their backs turned to him. He can’t hear Bill anymore, even though he can still feel him banging his fists against the door. Richie knows he should be more freaked out about that, but he’s too scared to even think.

It takes him a minute, because the song is slightly off-key and there are stray notes here and there that unsettle him to his core, but when he’s finally able to hear it he almost laughs.

“Is this that fucking wedding song?” he asks the room, and the figures turn to face him. It’s not a fast turn, like he startled them, but slow, mechanical, unnatural. The figure on the right is a man, short blonde hair and black tux looking sharp on a body made of what looks like puppet joints and polished wood. He’s as handsome as some fucked-up puppet can be, all shining ideal American husband. The figure on the left is a woman, that’s obvious by the white wedding dress she wears. She has a veil on, and Richie can’t stop himself from walking toward her through the graveyard of folding chairs.

When the veil is finally gone, he feels like it’s a repeat of before with the poster, but so many times worse. *That’s my hair, those are my glasses, that’s my face*, he thinks, and somehow his brain gets choked up and can’t keep going. She looks tiny next to the groom, and her hair is long, trailing down her back, and her face is soft and thin and made-up and his mind is a litany of *no, no, no*. Her ball-jointed hand falls from her face and rests on her stomach which, between one blink and the next, has grown and rounded and juts out from her body. The shiny silk of her dress is drawn taut over her pregnant belly, which she strokes with a gentle hand.

Richie leans over and valiantly avoids puking on his own shoes.

When he looks up again, the man has been replaced by that clown, that *fucking* clown. “Beep beep, Rachel,” he says, and charges, and Richie screams and runs and screams more when the door opens—finally—and Bill drags him through with a hand fisted in his collar.

When they make it downstairs and that fucking *thing* is in front of Eddie, Richie still can’t think. When Bev stabs It through its nasty, gnarled face he loves her more than he’s loved anyone before. Except maybe Eddie, who he rushes to as soon as he can. He grabs Eddie’s face while the monster growls behind them, because this might be the last time he ever can, and he begs Eddie to look at him, because he knows neither of them want to die alone.

They don’t get time to breathe, not when It walks backward down the stairs and they’re all screaming at Bill not to follow, not when they carefully fit Eddie into Mike’s front basket, not when they wait for Sonia Kaspbrak to pick up her son. He’ll blame the stress later, when he thinks over what he did.

At least until it’s barely a week later, when Bowers calls him a *faggot* and he flees rather than face Bowers without his friends there to hold him up. He’s still pissed about Bill and crying and alone in the park and It finds him.

“Not enough of a man to love a woman, are you, Richie?” It taunts, and the Paul Bunyan statue comes to life, and he swears that he’s never going to find the lumberjack look attractive ever again.

Bev was right, no one else was going to do anything to help all of those kids who went missing, and no one was going to be able to stop more kids from going missing, either.

It’s some cruel joke from the world that *she’s* the next one to get snatched.

*

He never told the Losers about what the clown taunted him with, because he never got the time to. When they finally fight It and its head morphs into an adult—female—Richie, he knocks her teeth out with his bat and grins with a sick satisfaction as he watches her head

crack back.

When they finally get back into town and Eddie says he can't go home looking the way he does, Richie fully agrees, and though he gives him shit, he also suggests that they go back to his house so Eddie can get cleaned up. It's not that his parents won't care, because they will, but they won't freak out. He's proven right when they open the door and his mom stands up from her reading nook to fret over them.

"Oh my goodness! What in the world happened to you two?" she asks, voice high and concerned as her hands flap over both of their shoulders.

"Bowers was chasing us," Richie says, and Eddie looks at him sharply. It wasn't technically untrue, but Richie realizes that's not why Eddie's looking at him like that. Eddie never tells his mom anything, so the fact that Maggie Tozier knows about her child's bully is surprising to him. Richie's sure never mentioned to Eddie that he tells his mom pretty much everything, even if she only remembers half of it. "We fell down the ravine," he adds, in explanation of the stain that looks like mud smeared over Eddie's front.

Maggie pats the side of Richie's face and looks at him, a huff escaping her, face laden with fond exasperation. "You really need to be more careful, kids."

Richie holds her hand to his face for a moment and smiles at her. "Yeah, yeah, mom." He lets her straighten and tugs on Eddie's elbow. "We're gonna go shower so Mrs. K doesn't flip out when Eddie gets home," he says. Eddie tears his arm away and punches him in the back as he starts walking upstairs behind him.

"Do you want me to let her know you're here, Eddie?" Richie's mom asks, and Eddie freezes midstep.

"Um," he starts, intelligently, looking to Richie. He just shrugs. Eddie takes their handrail in a vice grip. "Can you tell her I stayed over here last night and forgot to call her?" he asks, voice shaky as he practically puts his life in her hands.

Maggie looks a bit surprised, but the smile is back on her face in a blink. “Sure can, Eddie. Go get cleaned up. I’ll get you two some snacks.” And just like that, she’s off, and Richie has to grab Eddie by the front of his shirt to get him to keep walking.

“Your mom is awesome,” Eddie says later, after his skin is rubbed pink and warm from the shower and he has a towel wrapped around his shoulders. Richie tries really hard not to look, and busies himself with finding a shirt so he doesn’t have to live in his personal hell.

“Yeah, she’s pretty cool sometimes,” he confirms. He wants to leave it at that, but of course Eddie can’t. Even though everything about him would say otherwise, he was always the one to push the hardest, was always the one to poke something with a stick if he thought it could be worthwhile.

“What do you mean, ‘sometimes’?” Eddie asks, and Richie chucks a t-shirt at his face vindictively for doing so.

“I dunno. She’s my mom, y’know? Doesn’t everyone hate their mom sometimes?” Richie shrugs and falls back onto his bed. He doesn’t want to talk about all the times she forgot things he told her because she wasn’t interested in what he had to say, doesn’t want to talk about how she’d look through the things in his room sometimes while he was out, doesn’t want to talk about how rarely he got hugged, how rarely *I love you* got said in their house. He doesn’t want to talk about how it had been nearly three years since Ellie had started exclusively calling him *Richie*, and *he*, and *brother*, but his mother still hadn’t caught on. He doesn’t want to talk about it, so he stares at the stars on his ceiling and scratches at his ribs under his too-tight sports bra and hopes that Eddie will just agree.

“Yeah,” Eddie says, but it sounds so defeated Richie can’t be happy about getting what he wants. “I guess so.”

Notes for the Chapter:

Hope u enjoyed! I have most of chap 2 written but bear with me! Thanks for reading :)

2. Chapter 2

Notes for the Chapter:

Same warnings as last chapter, in case stuff like this bothers you: some discussion of like. coming to terms with gender + sexuality by an underage character! Nothing like crazy explicit but a general warning. f-slur + internalized homo/transphobia

Richie walks Eddie home after they're both cleaned up and calmed down. It takes a few more hours than Richie thought it might—mostly his own fault—but they end the day with a high-five on the Kaspbrak porch.

“You killed it today, Eds,” Richie says, swiping a hand across Eddie’s bangs. His hair has curled lightly from his earlier shower, and Richie’s been trying not to touch it for most of the day. He figures he’s earned it now, after the horrible 36 hours they’ve had.

Eddie smacks his hand away and feints a gut-punch, which has Richie flinching. “We definitely killed *something* today,” Eddie replies, a vicious smile on his face. It’s a face that Richie has seen before, when Eddie started throwing rocks at Bowers’s gang, whenever he beats Richie at *Street Fighter*, whenever he manages to annoy Stan to the point where he gets yelled at. It’s a smile that makes Richie’s internal dialogue stall and turn into an extended dial tone.

He doesn’t recover particularly well, resorts to just, “Well, I’ll see you tomorrow, Spaghetti Man,” and Eddie tells him to shut up, and Richie doesn’t march right back up the steps when the door closes and he hears Sonia Kaspbrak’s raised voice from halfway down the sidewalk. He stops, and he looks at the door, but he doesn’t, and he walks back to his house instead.

It’s nearly dinner time, and the August heat is still oppressive as the sun starts its descent. When he gets to his room he peels off his button-down, his t-shirt, his ripped jeans, and is asleep before his head hits the pillow.

*

Bev doesn't go back to home. She stays with Stan's family the first night, and Bill the next, and Ben three days later, and Richie tells his mom about Mr. Marsh and she tells him to tell Bev to come over, and that she can stay as long as she likes. Bev does, with a timid determination Richie admires her endlessly for. She calls her aunt, who sends money to help out and starts making calls about getting custody of her. In the meantime, while Theresa starts the work on putting Mr. Marsh behind bars, Bev stays with the Toziers and "Ellie's old room" becomes "Bev's room" and Richie can feel the life flowing from her stronger than he ever did before.

*

They make their oath a week before school starts up again, down by the river. Richie doesn't want to come back here if he ever makes it out, but he knows that he will, because these are the best friends he's ever had, and he'd do anything for them. He'd do anything, like let Bill slice open his palm, like let Bill slice open *Eddie's* palm, like come back to this shithole even though he knows he's gonna be far away someday.

He watches when Bev gets her hand cut, watches her not flinch, and can only think, *Badass*. He lets Eddie take his hand, lets his blood soak into the plaster of his cast and tries to think about it as anything other than kind of romantic. He knows that Eddie will freak out about it, but the knowledge that he's not going to be able to scrub all of Richie's blood off, that he's going to be carrying a bit of Richie with him until the cast comes off, makes Richie flush under the summer sun.

—*—

Ben corners him at his fourteenth birthday party, the sneaky asshole, and passes him a gift bag. "I did some research," he says, tugging down the sleeves of his shirt now that he's handed off the present to Richie. "You know about that Stonewall riot, right? And how it was people like you who kinda started it? Well, I figured, maybe they'd know a thing or two about how to help out, y'know?"

Richie doesn't know, not really, hadn't even had the thought of reaching out to people, even though he knew he wasn't the only one. He didn't think there would be help out there for him, but he doesn't feel like an idiot because Ben has always been so smart with stuff like this. He knows there must've been dozens of phone calls and dead ends and legwork that went into whatever is in this bag.

"Is that why you took a field trip to New York?" he asks, and Ben smiles and shrugs, bashful as ever.

"I mean, my mom was there on business, so not really—"

"But you didn't have to go with her," Richie clarifies, looking at him wide-eyed.

"No," Ben says, and Richie lunges forward to hug him. "You don't even know what it is, yet!" he protests, and Richie just shakes his head.

"Don't need to," he says. "I already know it's perfect."

And it was, god damn it, it really was. He doesn't open it until he's back home from Mike's barn, but he spends just a moment being confused before he's tearing off his shirts and his ratty old sports bra to pull on the tight top. It hugs his ribs in a way his other solutions never did, and he pulls his t-shirt back over his head to get the full effect in his closet mirror. He runs a hand down his chest in awe, turns from side to side, flexes his arms, raises them above his head. Then he turns on his heel and stomps into Bev's room.

"Beverly Marsh!" he whisper-yells, because his parents are asleep down the hall. He closes the door behind him and lets his voice raise a couple of notches. "Look at my fucking pecs!"

She stares at him on her bed, sock off halfway, and says, intelligently, "Holy shit."

"I know, right?" He walks toward her, still patting his chest, and his cheeks hurt with how much he's smiling. "I think I have to marry Ben out from under you. Sorry, Red."

"I hate you," she says, but Richie knows she doesn't because she puts

her hands on his shoulders and turns him to the left and to the right. "That's amazing. You gotta let me look at it sometime so I can figure out how to make you more," she says, and Richie crushes her into a hug without thought. She hugs him back, and he loves her. No matter what shitty situation brought her here, he's glad that she's here taking up the space his sister left behind. He couldn't think of anyone better to fill those shoes.

—*—

Richie starts to shoot up at the tail end of their last year of middle school, and by the time June rolls around he's taller than Stan and Bill and there's more inches between him and Eddie than there was before. That isn't to say that Eddie doesn't grow, because he does, and Richie is all too aware of it.

Their friends get summer jobs. Mike works on his family's farm, Ben works at the library, Bill works down at the pawn shop, and Stan and Bev end up working at a diner at the bottom of the hill on main street. That summer, he ends up hanging out with Eddie alone even more than he did in middle school. Mrs. K won't let Eddie get a job, and Richie doesn't want one because he doesn't want to have to deal with the hassle of having his nametag say a name that's not his. So, Eddie gets an allowance from his mom, and Richie does odd jobs around the house and walks his neighbor's dogs and mows lawns and starts saving. He doesn't know what he's saving for, exactly, but as much as he wants to just spend the money right away, he knows he'll be happy he's saved it later.

Richie is pulling out a couple of bills from his pocket when Eddie's hand falls over his, and he whips his head up to look at him with wide eyes. Eddie looks down at the crumpled money in Richie's fist and grimaces, but tilts his eyes up to him again a moment later. "I owe you for filling up my tires," he explains, as he hands a precisely folded fiver over to the cashier.

"Oh. Sure," Richie agrees, sounding like his head is in the clouds. Eddie has gotten tan over the past month of summer, despite the sunscreen he slathers on every morning. His hair has lightened up a little, too, and it just brings out the darkness of his eyebrows and the smudge of his eyelashes against the tops of his cheeks as he ducks his

head to fold his change into his wallet.

Eddie takes both of their cones, and then hands Richie's his, and Richie thinks it's a mark of maturity that he doesn't shove his ice cream into Eddie's face the same way he did so many years ago, when he was feeling the same as he does now. Maybe it's a part of getting used to his crush on Eddie, or maybe he's getting boring like he promised he wouldn't, but whatever the case, they exit the parlor without ice cream ending up on anyone's face.

They don't even discuss where they're going, because they've done this enough this summer that they know exactly what the plan is. Eddie grips his handlebars in the middle with one hand and Richie gets on his own bike, steering with one hand while he casually pushes himself along with his feet. He's way too tall for this bike now, and he thinks that maybe he'll ask for a new one when Christmas rolls around. They're only religious on holidays, when he and his dad are forced to sit through Christmas Eve mass. He'd inherited the genetic tendency to question God from his Jewish father, and his Catholic mother withers every time she has to get them to behave during the hour and a half it takes for the priest to get through whatever he has planned for the night.

There's no withering now, while Richie and Eddie lazily make their way to the Barrens to the clubhouse Ben discovered a few years back. He's reinforced it even more since the first time, and there's little trinkets and keepsakes from all of the Losers that have found their home down there. Stan has his tin of showercaps, mostly unused nowadays. There's an old camping lantern Mike brought down when his uncle bought a new one, there's blankets and a couple milk crate chairs and hand sanitizer and a trash can and a plastic bin full of snacks.

Richie stuffs the wrapper from his cone into a pocket before he opens the hatch and heads down. Eddie leaves it open when he eventually picks his way down the ladder. He finds the other hatch they'd installed to get in more light and air and props it open, too.

It's weird, but sometimes they don't end up talking much. Just before, it was because they were eating, but their hands and their mouths aren't full anymore and Richie doesn't really want to fill the

silence with anything. He just flops down on the hammock and pulls a comic out from the box he's filled up over the past few months and settles in.

It's only a couple of seconds before that silence is broken, and Eddie spits out, "Fuck you."

Richie looks up at him, eyes wide with perfect innocence. "What, what did I do? What did I, Richie Tozier, do to cause this vicious assault on my character?" It's ruined by the shit-eating smile that crawls over his face toward the end.

Eddie stalks toward him, pointing an accusatory finger. "You had the hammock the last time," he says, jabbing Richie in the chest. It causes a little thrill in Richie that Eddie's not afraid to do that, that he treats him like he's got a flat chest under his shirt like the rest of the boys. "We agreed we'd switch off, since you can never just stick to the ten-minute rule!"

"Did you get that in writing?" Richie asks, and Eddie releases what can only be described as a growl before he fits into the hammock beside Richie and angrily opens his own comic in front of his face. Richie hides his smile behind comic. They always end up like this, no matter who's 'turn' it is in the hammock. If it's Eddie's, then Richie will force his way in, too. If it's an act of revenge, Richie is able to handle it, however poorly. If they just outwardly agreed to share, Richie doesn't think he'd survive.

He pulls down the comic from his face to look over to Eddie, and knocks their knees together to get his attention. He pulls a face when Eddie's face emerges, still looking pissed. The headache he gets from crossing his eyes long enough to get Eddie to laugh and call him an idiot is worth it.

*

They're halfway through their freshman year of high school when Richie stands up from his desk, leaving his winter break homework with barely a dent in it, to see Bev in her room across the hall.

"What's up, dickwad," she greets, lying on her back with a magazine

held over her face. He ignores her, lays down on his stomach on the end of her bed, and doesn't even bother complaining when she props her feet up on his back. She changes her mind after a minute, and digs her freezing cold toes under his stomach instead.

"Jesus, your toes are popsicles," he complains, and she wiggles them underneath him.

"Not my problem, anymore." Bev tosses a pillow at his face and he yelps, loudly. "Why are you bothering me?"

Richie considers it for barely a second before he's turning his head away from her and mumbling to the room, "I have a crush on someone." It's gotten too big for him to keep it in anymore, and he needs to let someone else know about it in the hopes that it'll be easier for him to carry if he has an extra set of hands.

He hears when Bev closes the magazine, feels her draw her feet back to her as she sits up. "Really?" she asks, and Richie frowns when he hears a bit of a laugh in it. "Who?"

"You can't make fun of me, okay?" he says, turning his head to her in the hope that his miserable face will garner him some sympathy. "I'm *dying* here, Red."

"Oh, no. That bad, huh?" She pats his head, and he blows a dislodged curl out of his face.

He looks up at her, the furrow in her brow, the little pout she's put on, and he pulls the hood of his sweatshirt over his head. "Do you wanna guess?" he asks, stalling for time even though he knows it's not going to do much. He only hangs out with one group of people, and she knows all of them. It won't take too many tries for her to get it right.

She props her head up on her hand, leaning over her crossed legs. "I think I know. I kinda want to hear you say it, though."

Richie presses his face into the bed and groans. "Tell me what you think the first initial is," he says, muffled into the fabric.

"Buddy, we both know it's E."

Richie moves his legs to the edge of the bed and slides off with a dramatic extended groan. He makes a satisfying thump when his back hits the floor. He covers his face with his hands and keeps groaning until Bev throws her other pillow at him.

“Shut up, you baby. It’s only obvious because I fucking live with you,” she says, and her tone is just enough teasing and comforting that Richie lets his hands fall to his side. He looks up at her ceiling, covered in the same glow-in-the-dark stars his is.

“I think you knew way before then,” he says, crossing his arms over his chest, a comforting motion. There was the summer they first met, when she’d given him a look when she saw him with Eddie and he knew that she *knew*. “I’m probably really fucking obvious. Don’t be nice to me.”

“Okay, I won’t be,” Bev says, and Richie looks to her with a pout. “Shut up,” she says, even though he didn’t say anything. “I dunno... I think the rest of them haven’t noticed because they think that all guys like girls.”

He barely gets out the, “Yeah, but I’m not—” before Bev is rushing off the bed to retrieve a pillow to smother him with it. He gasps and struggles and kicks his knees up at her shoulder, slaps her arms with his hands.

“Don’t be mean to my friend!” she yells at him, and Richie can’t stop laughing, choking on the pillowcase in his mouth. He’s panting and flushed when she finally lets him breathe again, but he’s smiling.

“Don’t try to kill your friend!” he yells at her, but the effect is lost because they’re both grinning wide. It’s big for Richie, to even admit this much. Bev’s been telling him about how sweet Ben is for a couple years at this point, and will talk to him about the kids at their school and try to get him to talk about what he thinks of them. He’s had his lips firmly sealed, and now that he’s unlocked that door he can’t stop everything from spilling out and he’s lost the key to lock it all up again.

“You kinda know what I mean, though, right? It’s all messed up in here,” Richie says, waving vaguely at his head. “I feel so fucking *girly*

, liking another guy,” he adds, grimacing. “I hate it. All this mushy shit.”

“Maybe stop looking at it like you’re a girl, ‘cause you’re not,” Bev chastises, tugging on the collar of his baggy sweatshirt. “Just... I don’t know,” she says, lightly slapping the side of his face. “How about you think about this: do you want to be his boyfriend?”

He keeps his eyes focused on the little plastic Saturn stuck on Bev’s ceiling and thinks. He thinks about being the one to buy him ice cream, and slinging his arm over Eddie’s smaller shoulders, and *kissing* him. When he’d thought about it in the past, it was Eddie making all the first moves because that’s just how he thought it should go. But he can do that, too, he thinks as heat rises to his face. He wants to try out for the football team just so he can make Eddie wear his fucking letterman jacket.

And isn’t that a concept? The second Tozier kid growing up to be gay, but not in the way either of her parents had started to suspect. Little Rachel Tozier, ever the tomboy, never growing up to be a lesbian like her parents whispered she might be in their bedroom after dark. Richie’s a boy who likes other boys, and he’s not excited to have to inevitably explain that, but he’s excited to finally have figured out what’s going on inside.

“There it is,” Bev says, and Richie grabs the pillow to hit her in retaliation. She finds the other one, and their talk devolves into a childish pillow fight while they hurl insults at each other’s pummeling technique.

“It’s weird though, right?” Richie asks, laid out and panting on the floor again, laying next to Bev who’s in the same state this time. “I mean, I’ve known him since we were like eight years old. And it’s *Eddie*,” he stresses, flopping an arm over Bev’s stomach.

“I dunno,” she says, picking up his hand to play with his fingers. “I think it’s cute. You could tell the story to your kids someday.” She waggles her eyebrows at him and he snags his hand back to punch her in the shoulder.

“I’m *never* fucking *birthing a child*, are you kidding me?” There’s a

memory playing at the edges of his mind that he can't grasp, but he knows it's something bad. Something that makes him sick to his stomach, the hazy memory of an organ playing and a pregnant woman in a white dress, and he knows like breathing that he'll never want to have a child that's his flesh and blood.

"You can adopt, dumbass," Bev says, and the fantasy spins wildly out of control in front of him. There's a future where he could do that, and where he could marry Eddie in matching suits, and where they could nurture a kid into a carbon copy of both of them, and his heart swells so big it's fit to burst. He hides the smile on his face with a joke, because he's had enough revelations about himself for one day.

"Holy shit, Bev. We should totally hook up. There's no risk of teen pregnancy. We'd be invincible."

"Beep beep, Rich."

*

Ellie comes home a few days later, and falls in love with Bev immediately. They're nearly perfect replicas of each other, personality-wise, and it sends Richie directly into his own personal hell.

"So, Beverly," she says on Christmas Eve, leaning up against Bev's bed on the floor across from Richie, reading under the window's cold winter light. Their feet are pressed together on Bev's plush rug, and Ellie grins at Richie when he looks up at her with a glare. He knows what's coming, because she's always been too good at reading him. She probably knew about his crush on Eddie before he did, so it comes as no surprise when she continues, "How's that Kaspbrak kid doing?"

All he does is flip her off while Bev starts laughing her ass off on the bed. Ellie gives him such a sweet smile, he can't stay mad at her. She'd been supportive since the very beginning. He's lucky she was even able to make it back for this winter break. It's the first time he's seen her in months, and now that he's had his revelation with Bev, he thinks he needs her in his corner for his newest plan.

“Oh yeah, yuck it up, you two. You’re gonna be dealing with the fallout of me coming out *twice*, and then who’s gonna be laughing?” It gets a laugh out of both of them, but it’s more subdued than before. Richie has been thinking about it, and he knows that he can’t do it without Ellie behind him, supporting him.

“Do you want my help?” she asks, and Richie smiles when he traps her left foot between his.

“Yeah. I wanna do the whole ‘I’m a guy’ thing first, though. The whole ‘I’m gay’ thing doesn’t really make sense otherwise,” he says. It’s the first time he’s said it out loud, but Ellie doesn’t even blink. She just looks at him, pride twisting up the corner of her mouth into a smile so similar to his own.

In the end, it goes about as well as he could have expected it would. On Christmas, after the presents have been opened and they’re sitting around the living room with hot cocoa and egg nog, he lays it all bare. He explains how he feels, and his mom cries about how she’s losing a daughter, Richie points out that he drafted Bev as his replacement, and his dad cracks a joke about how he always wanted a boy anyway. He knows it won’t be an easy change for his parents to deal with, but the relief of not having to hide it anymore outweighs the anxiety that tightened its grip around his heart during the conversation. He gets hugs all around, and his dad’s voice sounds a little awkward when he places a hand on his shoulder and says to him, “Thank you for telling us, son.” He appreciates the effort, and he knows it’ll get better with time.

—*—

It’s not the first time it’s happened, but it never stops feeling horrible. Bowers isn’t even there, but his lackeys always pick up their ringleader’s slack, hurling insults at Richie until he can’t get out of the arcade fast enough. Richie catches one of them yelling “Fag!” as the door swings closed behind him, and doesn’t stick around for them to come after him. He pedals faster than he has since the summer after seventh grade. His legs burn as he pedals down main street, his lungs shudder when he rattles over the wood chips and fallen branches when he finally makes it to the Barrens.

His bike falls to the ground next to the trapdoor of the club house and he throws it open. He thumps heavily down the ladder and pauses to breathe when his feet hit the hard dirt floor. His eyes close as he rests his forehead on a rung, working through his panting.

“Fuck,” he sighs out, hard, as Belch’s twisted up face flashes in front of his eyes, his face pinched up in disgust. He breathes, and knows he’ll never be safe in this town. It’s just a rumor, now, but someday they’ll find out for sure and then he’s screwed. He’ll just be another queer kid in a small town who got murdered and people won’t even remember him by the end of the year. A sob rips past his throat, unstoppable, and he grips the step his forehead rests on tightly in both hands.

“Jesus, Richie. What ha-a-appened to y-y-y-ou?”

He spins, and sees Bill sitting in the hammock, eyebrows raised. Richie’s heart inches further up his throat and his eyes dart wildly around the clubhouse. His anxiety wanes some when he finds Bill is the only one there. He swallows thickly.

“Nothing, Billiam! What happened to you? Looks like your hair got caught in a blender,” he shoots back, quickly moving to sit on one of the milk crates lying along the wall of the clubhouse. He drums his fingers on his knees, then stops himself. He taps his feet instead, and forces himself to stop that, too. When he folds his legs underneath him and shoves his hands into his lap, he wrings his fingers out of sight.

Bill looks at him like he doesn’t believe him, the unfortunate downside of knowing someone for over half of your life. “You l-look like you saw a ghost or something,” he comments, as Richie looks everywhere but back at Bill.

“Nope!” he responds, as cheerily as he can muster. “Just some anti-homo assholes, same-old, same-old, Billy boy!” Bill has witnessed the words Bowers and his crew would hurl at Richie, especially since high school started and they’d pass in the hallways more often. When Bill sucks in a breath and Richie finally meets his eyes, he remembers he’s never really talked about it, and he’s never really had a reaction to it around Bill before. When he’s with his friends, it’s easier to

coast, easier to brush it off his shoulder and move on with whatever they were doing. When he's alone, it gets stuck in his head on a loop. The thought that he's not right, that no matter what he'll never be able to fit in like he so desperately wants to, skips in his head like a broken record.

"It's fine," Richie says. His voice cracks, and he puts his head in his hands. The hammock chain squeaks as Bill stands, and he sighs in resignation before Bill's heavy hands rest comfortingly on his shoulders.

"They're just saying it t-to get to you," Bill says, kneeling in front of him in the dirt. "N-n-no one else th-thinks that, Rich." Richie rubs his eyes harder, then lets his hands drift to run tangle in his hair. He pulls on his curls as he looks at Bill's knees and feels sick.

"Yeah, but they should." Bill lets out a confused noise, and Richie shakes his head like a wet dog, powering through. "I'm fucking gay, Bill. It's the truth. I don't..." he huffs, pulling the sleeves of his light hoodie down over his palms. "I don't care if you guys know, 'cause you guys know worse about me. But you can't just say shit like that to me and expect it to not fuck me up."

"Oh god, Richie. I didn't—" Bill starts, and then he's wrapping his arms around Richie's hunched shoulders. Richie breathes him in, the scent of dirt and dust and fresh spring growth and dollar store deodorant and clean laundry, smells his childhood spent underground and out of sight of judging eyes. "I didn't mean it l-l-like that. We don't think it's *bad*, is wh-what I mean. You know w-we lo-love you, Richie."

Richie bumps his chin on Bill's shoulder when he finally brings his hands to grip the back of Bill's flannel shirt, clenching him in a vice grip. "I know, B-B-Bill," he says, joke lost in how strangled his voice sounds. It gets him a thump on the back from Bill, though, so it's not a total failure.

They stay there for a minute, until Bill is sitting back, crossing his legs and looking at Richie with eyes that house a look that's still far too old for him. "Do you want to talk about it?" he asks, and Richie shakes his head before deciding that no, he does. If there was anyone

he felt comfortable enough with to talk to about it, it was Bill. He'd already told Bev and his sister, so what was one more person?

"I don't really know what to say about it," he sighs, leaning his head on his hand. "I've got a big fat gay crush on one of my best friends and I'm worried those assholes will find out they're right and end up chucking me into the river."

Bill looks at him, stricken, and opens his mouth to speak but nothing comes out. "It's not you," Richie assures, patting the side of Bill's face. "You really think I'd admit it like that? Jesus, I figured I had a little bit more of a reputation for theatrics than that."

"I don't know!" Bill says, voice far too loud for the closeness of the clubhouse. Richie winces, and Bill lowers his voice. "If n-not me, then —" he starts, and then his mouth snaps shut. Richie frowns at him, begins to speak, and Bill cuts a hand sharp across his throat.

It's made apparent why a second later, when the hatch swings open above them and Richie catches sight of Eddie's shoes before the rest of him follows. He's babbling something as he slides down the ladder, and Richie catches his own name, but he can't hear him over the blood suddenly rushing in his ears. Eddie's wearing a pair of high-waisted jeans and a long-sleeved polo that's at least a size too big for him. Richie thinks he's so cute he might die.

Eddie's chattering stops when he sees Bill is there too, commenting, "Oh, sorry, Bill. I didn't see your bike."

"I walked," Bill replies, looking at Richie's red face like he's just had a revelation. Which, to be fair, isn't inaccurate. He looks to Bill in a panic when Eddie turns to pull over a crate. He watches a smile split across Bill's face and, despite the lightness in his chest from his little coming-out party, wishes the past five minutes hadn't happened.

"And I'm leaving!" Richie stands, reaching the ladder in one stride of his long legs. He doesn't bother looking behind him when Eddie groans, doesn't think he'd be able to leave if he looked at his disappointed face.

"But I just got here," Eddie whines. The creak of the milkcrate he sits

down on is loud and abrupt enough that Richie can picture him, sitting there with a pout on his cute, cute, cute face. His lower lip must be jutting out, dark brow furrowed over darker eyes.

Richie shakes his head where he's stopped halfway up the ladder, and continues on. "My life doesn't revolve around you, Eddie Spaghetti."

"Call me that one more goddamn time and I'm gonna kill you!" Eddie yells after him, and Richie gets a little bit of sick satisfaction slamming the hatch shut behind him.

—*—

Sophomore and Junior year pass in a blur of studying and late night milkshake runs and exams and bonfires and hours in the quarry until it's been yet another year of repressing his crush on his best friend and it feels like Richie blinked and he was in his last month of high school. He realizes the end is nigh when one of the kids from the football team starts pinning up a banner in the lunchroom, one that says, "MICHELLE WILL YOU GO TO PROM WITH ME?" in big wobbly block letters. They all stare at the kid standing nervously under the banner while he waits for his girlfriend to get to the lunchroom. Richie munches thoughtfully through his bag of chips as he appreciates the spectacle that is the public embarrassment of high school relationships.

When Michelle finally comes in and squeals as she hugs her boyfriend Josh or whatever, Bill turns to the rest of the table. "So we're going as a group, right?" he asks, and they collectively deflate in relief.

"Oh, thank God," Stan heaves, sprawling across the table. "I don't think I could get through whatever Richie would try to do to woo some poor girl."

"Hey, screw you, birdbrain!" Richie says while the rest of the table breaks into laughter. "I'm classy as fuck! I'll have you know I'd plan the best fucking promposal in the history of promposals."

"Oh yeah?" Bill asks, one eyebrow raised. "Let's put you on the spot right now, Trashmouth. What's your plan?"

“Okay, one: I’m really disappointed in your opinion of me, truly,” Richie says, pointing to each of them in turn.

“Stop stalling, Rich,” Ben says, and Richie flips him off. He glares as he slowly extends his pointer finger too, and then raises his eyebrows pointedly, a wild grin on his face.

“Two: nothing corny like this bozo over here,” he jerks a thumb over his shoulder at the jock and his girlfriend who are now making out at their lunch table. “Real classy, like I said. Flowers, box of chocolates, nice dinner,” he ticks each item off on his fingers as he goes.

“That’s stuff for Valentine’s day, Richie,” Eddie points out, and Richie wants to knock himself unconscious when his brain immediately goes *Yeah, and what’s it matter? I want to do that kind of stuff for you every goddamn day.*

“That’s *romance*, Edward,” he says instead, and kicks himself anyway. “Well fine, okay, I take her to fucking *McDonald’s* and I buy her anything she wants and then I get down on one knee and pull a Ring Pop out of my ass and ask her if she’ll go with me.”

“Richie—” Stan starts, but he gets a slap on the arm for it.

“Listen, if she doesn’t wanna go to prom with me after that, then she’s not a girl I want to go to prom with.”

Bev raises her hand. “It’d work on me,” she says, and Richie gestures at her. *See?*

“And no other girl, ever,” Bill says, with his chin propped on his hand as he looks at Richie with fond exasperation.

“Screw them, then. Bev’s the only girl in this entire town worth asking, anyway.” He means it, and he knows the other guys agree, even if they don’t agree for the same reasons as him. It’s a blessing that they’re going as a group in more ways than one. They don’t have to worry about finding dates, or worry about being left out of anything, or worry about any of the drama that crops up at high school dances. It’s a blessing because Richie will be able to look at Eddie in the soft lights of the gymnasium and pretend that he asked

him to be there.

Notes for the Chapter:

Thanks again for reading!!!! Hopefully the next chap
will be up next week. Love u all!!!